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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000424

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: MILINKEVICH CONFIRMS PARTICIPATION IN CONGRESS

REF: A. MINSK 399

[1](#)B. MINSK 414

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) On May 22, Charge met with de facto opposition coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich, who pledged his active participation in the May 26-27 democratic congress. Milinkevich described the coalition as occupied with organizational issues and divided on questions of international support. Nevertheless, he committed himself to building the coalition by bringing together Belarus' civil society NGOs. End summary.

Milinkevich To Attend Congress, Urges Supporters Likewise

[1](#)2. (C) On May 22, Charge met with de facto opposition coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich to discuss the upcoming democratic congress, scheduled for May 26-27. Milinkevich said that he was not looking forward to the congress because of the recent round of regional opposition conferences, which he described as "uniting party forces, not democratic forces" (ref A). However, as expected (ref B), Milinkevich pledged that he would participate actively at the congress in order to prevent a confrontation within the coalition. When Charge mentioned having been told that some of Milinkevich's regional supporters were planning to boycott the congress, Milinkevich expressed sympathy for their sentiments but indicated that he would urge them to attend.

Milinkevich Sticks to His Guns on the Need for One Leader

[1](#)3. (C) Stressing that the USG considers close cooperation among Belarus' pro-democracy forces to be very important, Charge asked Milinkevich why he insists on such a high degree of coalition unity -- namely, the appointment of a single coalition leader in the absence of an election campaign. Claiming that the regional congresses had failed to discuss three important coalition documents, Milinkevich emphasized that the congress could not seriously consider these proposals without a single coalition leader to guide the deliberations. Furthermore, he argued that the coalition's strategy before Belarus' 2008 parliamentary elections must focus on organizing street demonstrations and that a single leader is necessary to recruit and rally new activists for such demonstrations. Milinkevich added that without this focus and a single leader, the coalition's strategy would remain merely a "grant strategy" aimed only at garnering Western financial support.

¶4. (C) Turning to the opposition's international support, Milinkevich claimed that opposition Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) Chair Sergey Kalyakin had been telling opposition activists that he had heavily financed the congress from funds he had received from Russian sources. (Note: Our sources have previously told us that Kalyakin may be receiving financial support from a Russian or Belarusian businessman who resides in Ukraine. However, we understand that U.S. NGOs NDI, IRI, and possibly others had planned to assume the bulk of the related expenses. End note.) Milinkevich expressed strong objections to Russian assistance, which, according to him, comes with "conditions" that threaten Belarus' independence. Moreover, Milinkevich warned that dependence on Russian aid could further aggravate differences within the coalition, particularly the ideological disagreements between BPC and the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), and cause the opposition's eventual splinter into two major blocs: pro-West and pro-Russia.

¶5. (C) When Charge asked the de facto coalition leader why the opposition party leaders continue to work together in spite of such differences, Milinkevich responded with three possible reasons. First, the coalition partners know that they must appear united in order to receive financial support from IRI, NDI, and other Western sources. Second, according to Milinkevich, the party leaders are united in their opposition to electing a single leader at this time -- though each of them hopes to become coalition leader in the future. Third, pointing to the parties' recent decision to deny voting rights to non-partisan "guests" at the congress,

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Milinkevich contended that the opposition political parties are united in minimizing the influence of civil-society NGOs in the coalition.

Milinkevich's "For Freedom" As a Unifying Movement?

¶6. (C) Attributing the success of the October 2005 opposition congress to the fact that one half of its delegates represented civil NGOs, Milinkevich frequently highlighted the importance of non-partisan organizations as a unifying element in the opposition movement. He told Charge of his plans to form a NGO "faction" around his "For Freedom" (Za Svabodu) movement at the congress. The strategy advanced by this faction would include: an information campaign; protection for repressed opposition and human rights activists; political and economic expert analysis; continued pressure on the authorities; and a pro-democracy education campaign geared particularly for activists in regions outside Minsk. Milinkevich elaborated that the problem facing the opposition was not "where to get involved" but "what to do."

Comment

¶7. (C) During the meeting, Milinkevich appeared a bit disheveled and weary. He was clearly upset by the recent regional conferences and meetings with other coalition leaders. To some extent his recent setbacks may have exaggerated his despondence about the future of the opposition. Only four days away from the congress, it is important that Milinkevich has confirmed his active participation in the event. However, it is quite evident that after the congress, Milinkevich intends to march ahead as leader of the For Freedom movement, with the same overall goals of the broader coalition, but largely independent from it.
Moore